

Disambiguation.

Text by Steve Reinke commissioned in by the publication '= ='

Maybe it's good to start a project with low expectations. Or if not low, exactly, vague. The people at Light Industry in New York were putting together a packed slate of events as their contribution to the alternative art fair No Soul for Sale and asked Jim and I if we would hastily assemble an exquisite corpse compilation from our respective stores of audio-visual material.

I didn't know Jim then, not really. We'd met when he was a participant at Lux's associate program in London and I was doing an exhibition there (Lux). But we didn't really hang out at all, or even talk, despite the efforts of Mike Sperlinger and Ben Cook, who told me I should pay attention to James' work. And if I didn't really pay attention to it then, it was only because the opportunity did not present itself.

They sent me home, back to America, with a DVD comp of the associates' work, and James' work did stick out, but I didn't pay any conscious attention to it. It entered into me like some kind of dream material, a specific kind of the uncanny: not my dream material, the material of another, but deeper, more compelling than my actual recollections or notions or desires.

A residue that sticks. A residue that sticks because it seems to have once been known and then forgotten, or repressed (a residue from the past). A residue that sticks because it is utterly foreign, but corresponds to a particular psychic hole or lack (a residue from the future). A residue that refuses to move forward, that holds contraries - desires that are undesired - in ambergris suspension. A residue that moves like an amoeba through hostile psychic territory, restless but patient, contingent yet purposeful.

I don't know how our working method developed. An exquisite corpse is a kind of blind (or dead) assembly. The structure may be predetermined, but it is left to chance how the individual components relate. This contingency of arrangement, of montage/collage: delirium.

But I don't think either of us had any interest making an exquisite corpse. I cannot speak to James Richards' beliefs, but I will anyway: we had no trust in surrealist delirium, in the idea that something interesting, some unconscious content or structure, would emerge. Perhaps we can even go so far as to say: there are no accidental deliriums. One must actively work to produce such a thing.

Also: fuck the subconscious. It is not your friend, and it is not your helper. There is no art there, only rot and slaughter churning against any future. The only delirium is a blind trust in such a thing. A pool to be tapped by some giant straw of fucked-upness that can suck some of that unconsciousness to the surface. There is no straw and there is no milkshake. Nonetheless, the idea that we were merely assembling an exquisite corpse was useful: all contingency, no pressure.

So we burned files to DVD and posted them. That is, we actually put them in little padded envelopes, walked to the post office, bought sufficient postage for overseas air mail, and sent them off. I'm Mac-based and use Final Cut, so I sent QuickTime files. He's a pc, uses Premiere. I forget what his files were. WAVs? Whatever they were they were PAL rather than NTSC, which was once a great technical impediment, but in this strange digital age our respective timelines took every file format, like previously incommensurate slime molds finding themselves layered happily in some primeval swamp.

Why is it I like clips of slim hairy dudes jerking off into their mouths? Because I am human, a human being. But many other clips as well, bundled together and posted overseas, mine like a care package to a Canadian soldier in WWI, Jim's, presumably, like those soldier's remains being sent home. Each clip holds some interest, of course, which may be to say each clip elicits, acknowledges, fulfills or negates some desire.

From the beginning, I liked his clips. Some seemed slight and empty, others intense and full, but all, somehow, compelling. (I like to be compelled.) Tremendously varied, but often sharing a kind of charged suspension in which nothing happens, though it seems like something just has or just may. Narrative and argument are frozen, emotion falls away, gravity is perhaps present, perhaps not. Some of his looping clips enact this suspension quite literally (Bambi's father confronting him silently with the news of his mother's

RODEO

death as the snow falls endlessly, Carrie dancing round and round) but elements of narrative and affect suspension seems to me a Richards' hallmark.

We worked on each other's clips, cutting, recombining, adding audio and text, constructing chapters and movements so that with each exchange, a piece began to form. A blood clot around a point of injury; inflammation; snot. Chocolate pudding to stop up the lungs, but not the legs. Five or six rounds back and forth and we had Disambiguation, our first collaboration and, at 46 minutes, the longest video I've been a part of making.

The miraculous thing for me was how effortless and joyful the whole process was. It was a pure kind of play. I loved what we made, but had no idea if others would. My work is usually addressed to the viewer directly. The narrator actively, desperately employing whatever rhetorical devices he can muster to capture the audience's attention. Disambiguation, despite the fact that it is a collaboration, seemed to me a very private, personal work. There is very little direct address; one is immersed, without a guide. I was initially afraid that Jim and I had made what amounted to the perfect television for me, a personal psychic tv program I could watch over and over but that might not have much meaning for others. A dream that turns banal when dispersed. Luckily this turns out not to be the case. Many viewers get sucked into the thing. It takes over their minds and their lives, for the next three or four days at least, are better for it.

This structure - a perpetual mental reality - leaves the subject bewildered. (Here I am paraphrasing a paragraph from Christopher Bollas' *The Infinite Question*, as it seems the most appropriate ending, though I should I go on to discuss my continuing collaborations with James, but they are not ready yet and so must not be written of.) Is the dream the most sophisticated form of thought? Yes, and whether you are awake or asleep. The dream can never be fully comprehended because it is more complex than the consciousness. You cannot understand the ocean in which you are swimming with all the other disagreeable creatures, though some of them you can fuck and some of them you can eat and some of them are pretty to look at and many are easy to ignore. The ocean is the subconscious, but also the city and also television. It is not yet the internet, but may be soon, with higher bandwidth. Maternal enigmatic signifiers? Barebacked out of existence. That other which will keep us perpetually off balance by sustaining the rift between what we know and what we might know if we were not so clumsy and forgetful.

Steve Reinke, 2011

RODEO